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ABSTRACT

In the period from 1950 to the present, there has been a progressive realization of the rhetorical character of scientific and technical discourse, rendering such discourse subject to formal rhetorical study. Audience is now seen as a formative influence on discourse. Technical writing must be tailored to audiences, not simply in terms of translating fully formed meanings to an audience-appropriate level, but also in terms of the way audience affects the content, organization, and style of the discourse. Studies of audience in technical discourse have focused on matters of style, organization, and invention: some recent attention has also been given to pathetic features, including the rejection of the impersonal voice. However, pathetic and ethos-related components have been slighted in favor of the logical. Treatment of ethos-related features has been unsystematic and largely prescriptive because these have not been seen as elements of one essential dimension. A framework is needed that would place personality and credibility within a total analysis of the ethos-related component of scientific and technical discourse. (DF)

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ETHOS IN TECHNICAL DISCOURSE: THE CURRENT STATE OF THE QUESTION

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My thesis may be stated briefly: academic study of technical and scientific writing has come in the last ten years to recognize the problem of ethos in technical communication because technical and scientific discourse has been increasingly understood as the product of rhetorical art. As a result, there has developed an important field for research in the rhetoric of scientific and technical discourse generally, and study of the ethical component of such discourse is one particular, and relatively unexplored, area of that field.

Let me begin with a statement of the position from which the change I wish to explore has developed. Written in 1950 by an English professor at Dartmouth College, this text has the virtue of expressing not only a once widely shared and still often held position regarding voice in technical writing, but also its rationale:

> The precision, accuracy, and definiteness demanded of all scientific exposition require the rigid exclusion of everything that does not bear directly upon the subject. The pains which scientists take with language and logic are also taken with the point of view from which their reports are written. The reader is not encouraged to think of the writer as an individual having the emotions, prejudices, and interests common to all men. For the intrusion of the writer's personality, like the intrusion of lively and colorful connotative meanings, might distract the reader or persuade him to make value judgments which would interfere with his acceptance of all of the facts and explanations of the report. The stern removal of personality, which makes ordinary writing the more interesting, strikes many nonscientists as a bit absurd, even a bit pretentious. But long experience has taught scientists that where clarity is important and strong interest may be assumed (as it may among specialists), the impersonal treatment of the materials is best.
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> Impersonality is achieved by the use of the third person. The materials of the report are presented much as though a

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> mechanical device automatically recorded what happened or what might be observed. When objects discussed in the report act themselves, the active voice of the verbs is used with the name of the object or the impersonal pronouns *it* and *they*. When a process is carried out or controlled by human agents, the passive voice is used so that the materials discussed in the report continue to hold the center of the reader's attention and the personal element is eliminated. If the persons participating in the process must be mentioned, they are referred to be means of abstract and impersonal nouns such as the *observer*, the *engineer*, the *chemist*, or the *operator*, or by means of the impersonal pronouns *one* and *he*. The use of the several devices of impersonality may be seen in the examples . . . .[1]

This passage makes explicit the logic and the rhetoric of impersonality. The rhetorical goal is to force attention to *logos* and to render the *ethos* of the writer as inobtrusive as possible. Or, more precisely, the goal is to render an inobtrusive *ethos* which will add its rhetorical weight precisely because it adheres to the stern code of scientific detachment and the suppression of personality which it is thought the readers of technical and scientific discourse approve. I doubt whether the cited author would have put it this way, however, for it seems clear that he did not in 1950 think of scientific exposition as rhetorical discourse at all. Rather, his reference to the "several *devices* of impersonality" is grounded in a conception of scientific and technical writing as consisting in the use of a certain prescribed style, a sanctioned "treatment" of one's already fully formed scientific and technical meaning, one's "material."

This passage may be contrasted with any number of recent texts. I have chosen a passage from Ver Don W. Ballantyne's description of a course in "Exposition and Report Writing" in one 1976 issue of *The Technical Writing Teacher*. His contention is that Freshman English is a source of certain notions obviously relevant to the study of technical writing, among them the conviction that "rhetorical stance [is] a reality that makes a difference. . . . Students who have a real audience whose good opinion they seek will take their writing quite seriously." But rhetorical stance in Ballantyne's view is not merely a pedagogically

useful notion: "When a person writes, whether he intends to or not, he reveals himself--his intelligent curiosity, his insight and reason, his perception, and his skill in dealing with intelligent people."[2]

What has changed in the twenty-five years between these two texts is succinctly put by Louis Perica's remark in a 1972 issue of Technical Communication that during the 1970's (given developments of the 60's), "the stress obviously will be on 'communication' rather than on 'technical'." Technical writing as a discipline discovered the radical influence of audience on the design--even on the very nature--of technical discourse. Although the fact of writing for a reader is recognized in the 1950 passage I cited, the reader there considered is a consumer of the discourse, not a formative influence on the discourse in all of its aspects.

The rhetorical character of scientific and technical discourse is recognized from 1950 to the present precisely to the extent that audience is understood to be formatively significant. Business writing, particularly correspondence, is thus often treated as rhetorical discourse, even in otherwise quite traditional texts.[4] Proposals and progress reports are increasingly treated as works which must be tailored to their audiences, not simply in terms of the need to translate fully formed meanings to an audience-appropriate level, but in terms of the way in which their specific addressees affect the content and organization, as well as the style of the discourse.[5] Feasibility studies and other reports that include explicit recommendations for action are also treated, occasionally, as formed by their authors' conceptions of their intended audiences. Finally, those who recognize the fundamental instrumentality of all technical and much scientific discourse, who hold that such discourse is Writing for Results, Writing That Works (to borrow the titles of two recent textbooks),[6] recognize its essentially rhetorical character. For instrumental discourse is precisely discourse embedded in the practical

realities of day-to-day business--if not in its reference, then in its address. And those (their number is growing) who wish to argue for whatever reasons that the discourse of science and technology is rhetorical regularly do so by pointing out the ways in which such discourse is, in a phrase, "audience-conditioned speech."[7]

Those who are now arguing the rhetorical character of scientific and technical discourse are engaged, so far as I can see, in one or a combination of three distinct enterprises. They seek either to broaden the field of rhetoric and thus its stature among the arts by displaying its value in the study of such essential discourse as that of science and technology.[8] Or they seek to establish the need to deliberate about the uses of science and technology by showing that scientific and technological discourse is rhetorical and ought to be subjected to the same forms of criticism as are applied to any rhetorical discourse. As Michael A. Overington puts it, the "rhetorical approach . . . can restore questions of the purposes of scientific inquiry, or practical action based on scientific knowledge, to rational discourse."[9] Or, third, they seek to construct a solid and systematic basis for analyzing and teaching the composition of scientific and technical discourse and seek authority to tap the elaborate and relatively coherent framework of traditional and contemporary rhetorical theory in constructing that basis.[10]

I have neither the time nor the competence to undertake here a comparative examination of the various arguments which have been put forward in support of the rhetorical character of scientific and technical discourse.[11] Suffice it to say that there is a growing consensus in favor of the view that what technical communicators have increasingly regarded as the "you-centered" character of their discourse renders that discourse radically subject to formal rhetorical study. But, even so, the applicability of all the categories of traditional rhetoric has been questioned. Indeed, J. C. Mathes, who has been a leader

in exploring the implications of audience in the design of technical and scientific discourse, has gone so far as to state that "beyond a fundamental concern for audience, traditional rhetoric does not provide the primary theoretical foundation for technical writing." One important reason for this conclusion is that Mathes regards the technical writer as organizationally bound and "directly responsible to organization rather than public values."[12] However, one might argue that traditional rhetoric does not require a public forum but only a deliberating (or judging or celebrating) community which is addressed, to quote Barbara Sharf's recent essay on the "Rhetorical Analysis of Nonpublic Discourse," in order to induce "the cooperation of others toward a specific end" by a strategic adaptation of the form and content of the discourse "to the characteristics of others from whom identification or participation is desired."[13] In any case, how fully the concepts and analytic tools of traditional or contemporary rhetorical theory may be employed is still an open question which will probably be solved operationally, by the successful use of such concepts and analytic tools in the actual study of the rhetoric of science and technology.

To date, much valuable analysis of audience in technical discourse has tended to focus on matters of style (vocabulary and syntax), organization, and invention in so far as audience purpose has been considered a determining factor in what and how much to include or exclude in the reference of the discourse.[14] There has even been some recent attention to pathetic features, including a now generally accepted argument for the rejection of impersonality, namely that a personal voice is more pleasant.[15] But pathetic and ethical components, which are intimately related in any case, have tended to be neglected in most discussions on the grounds that all or most or the best technical and scientific discourse is primarily logical. What needs to be recognized, it seems to me, is that if scientific and technical discourse is rhetorical by virtue of being audience-centered, then

it necessarily works in pathetic and ethical dimensions, as well as in a logical dimension.

Ethical features of scientific and technical discourse have been treated, if at all, in an unsystematic and largely prescriptive fashion, primarily because they have not been seen as elements of one essential dimension of all such discourse. As in the passage from Professor Ballantyne cited earlier, the recognition that an audience infers the character of the scientist or technician from his or her discourse is not accompanied by much analysis of what this means. Treatments, again, of business letters, progress reports, and proposals do discuss the notion of tone, but tend only to urge the adoption of certain tones--in alphabetical order, be careful, dignified, enthusiastic, honest, matter-of-fact, objective, polite, positive, respectful, and tactful. There is silence, or mystification, about how this is to be accomplished, or what exactly it means to "be" any of these things <u>in a discourse</u>. The scientist or technician is advised to attend to his <u>ethos</u>: "What sort of a person do you want your reader to feel that you are?"[17] But he is also told, either implicitly or explicitly, that "it is difficult to talk about tone with true technical precision; it is an intangible, something that we feel but that has no physical characteristics that we can describe."[18]

There are some notable exceptions to the general absence of analysis. Two recent articles by W. Earl Britton and Merrill Whitburn have treated personality in technical writing in some detail, pointing to certain devices--the use of the personal pronoun, the active voice, and occasional appropriate humor, among others--in the context of valuable hints and suggestions about the relationship of personality and impersonality to other dimensions of scientific and technical discourse.[19] And Michael Jordan's recent essay, "Credibility and Reasoning in Technical Writing," has identified certain features which promote credibility, (such as words and sentences of wualification). Of great value is the further

exploration of the impact on credibility of various forms of logic.[20] What is wanted now is the articulation of a framework which would place "personality" and "credibility" within a total analysis of the ethical component of scientific and technical discourse. There has, for example, been some work recently on the constructivist character of the concept of credibility which has identified the fictive nature of credibility, noting that an audience infers the credible character of its addressor from features of the address which it interprets in the light of prior contextual knowledge and experience.[21] But this work has not attended specifically to technical and scientific discourse and is limited in reference (though not implication) to credibility rather than personality or, indeed, to the broader concept of ethos which subsumes both. I, for one, would also analyze the broader concept of ethos as an audience construct, based on implications of character in discourse, as interpreted by the addressee's prior contextual knowledge and experience.

This brief survey has hardly begun to scratch the surface of current work in this area. Before my time is up, I do have just one other issue which must be raised, and that is a danger which I see in some of the most serious work on the concept of ethos in technical discourse which is now being done.[22] This is the danger of confusing, as studies of ethos easily do, three different realities: first, the ethic of a particular community, society, or period (that is, the habitual or customary attitudes which make up the given "character" of such a collective); second, the ethics of a particular author or group of authors; and third, those artistic and inartistic intimations of character which are available in discourses for interpretation by, and influence on, their addressees.[23] All three realities are of great interest, though perhaps the first is of particular interest to historians of ideas and cultures, as the second is the special concern of moralists. The third is a specifically and uncontestably rhetorical issue and

should in any case be of special interest to us. But wherever one's interest lies, it seems crucial that the confusion or conflation of these differences be avoided.

Time presses me to a conclusion. Much of what I have said is concerned with problems in the conceptualization of ethos in technical discourse, an obviously crucial area in laying the groundwork for any research program. Given the notion of ethos as the intimation of character in scientific and technical discourse, I see at least eight kinds of study which ought to be pursued. (1) We need to know more about the inferences and reasons for them which audiences actually draw from texts about the characters of writers.[24] (2) We need to know more about the considerations that competent writers actually give to questions of ethos when designing their technical and scientific discourses. (3) We need to speculate more systematically about the kinds of features which might have ethical implications in technical and scientific discourse, and we need to confirm these speculations with experiments framed to test the hypotheses that such features do in fact have such implications.[25] (4) We need to study the effect on ethos of imposing such extrinsic and mechanical constraints as readibility formulas. (6) In the context of our need for a complete rhetoric of team-produced discourse, we need to consider the effects of team production on the ethos of technical discourse. Similar questions obtain in connection with ghost-written texts. (7) We need to study both inductively and deductively the question whether there are certain groupings of features which create ethical types and what relation such types have to the various genres and audiences of technical and scientific discourse.[26] (8) With regard to pedagogy, we need to know whether the study of ethos can help us choose between the competing alternatives of a "case" approach in which students play the roles and address the fictive audiences we set for them, or a real-time classroom where, in the voices they

choose for themselves, students learn to address an audience of colleagues they know and work with every day. There is, in short, much to be done.

NOTES

[1]John L. Stewart, Exposition for Science and Technical Students (New York, 1950), pp. 157-58.

[2]The Technical Writing Teacher, 3 (1976), pp. 64, 69.

[3]"Honesty in Technical Communication," Technical Communication, 19:1 (1972), 2.

[4]See, for example, Theodore A. Sherman and Simon S. Johnson, Modern Technical Communication, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975), Part III: "Business Correspondence; Herman M. Weisman, Basic Technical Writing, 3rd ed. (Columbus, Ohio, 1974), chapter 3, "Technical Correspondence;" or Steven E. Pauley, Technical Report Writing Today, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1979), Section Five: "Letters."

[5]See, for example, Frank R. Smith, "Use Rhetoric for Better Technical Proposals," Technical Communication, 22:3 (1975), 12-14; Robert L. Corey, "The Persuasive Technical Proposal: Rhetorical Form and the Writer," Technical Communication, 22:4 (1975), 2-5; and for Progress Reports, chapter 16 in Kenneth W. Houp and Thomas E. Pearsall, Reporting Technical Information, 4th ed. (Encino, Calif., 1980).

[6]David W. Ewing, Writing for Results (New York, 1974); Walter E. Oliu, Charles T. Brusaw, and Gerald J. Alred, Writing that Works (New York, 1980).

[7]Michael A. Overington, "The Scientific Community as Audience: Toward a Rhetorical Analysis of Science," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 10 (1977), 144.

[8]See, particularly, Walter B. Weimer, "Science as a Rhetorical Transaction: Toward a Nonjustificational Conception of Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 10 (1977), 1-29.

[9]Overington, p. 161. See, in addition to Overington's essay, Philip C. Wander, "The Rhetoric of Science," Western Speech Communication, 40 (1976), 226-35; S. Michael Halloran, "Eloquence in a Technological Society," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 221-27; and Carolyn Miller, "Technology as a Form of Consciousness: A Study of Contemporary Ethos," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 228-36.

[10]See Dwight W. Stevenson, "Toward a Rhetoric of Scientific and Technical Discourse," The Technical Writing Teacher, 5 (1977), 4-10; S. Michael Halloran, "Technical Writing and the Rhetoric of Science," Journal of Technical Writing and and Communication, 8 (1978), 77-88; Carolyn Miller, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," College English, 40 (1979), 610-17; and the special 4th quarter 1978 issue of Technical Communication, volume 25, on "Rhetoric and Technical Writing."

[11]See for such a review parts of Michael C. Leff, "In search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 73-91.

[12]J. C. Mathes, "Problem Solving: The Engineering in Technical Communication," Proceedings of the 1979 Frontiers in Education Conference.

[13]Barbara F. Sharf, "Rhetorical Analysis of Nonpublic Discourse," Communication Quarterly, 27 (1979), p. 22.

[14]Leading works in the study of audience include Thomas E. Pearsall, Audience Analysis for Technical Writing (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1969); J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson, Designing Technical Reports: Writing for Audiences in Organizations (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1976); and a number of articles by James W. Souther, including his recent piece, "Writing is for Other People," The Technical Writing Teacher, 6 (1979), p. 41.

[15]See Lee B. Woods, "Proposals are People, Too," Technical Communication, 19:2 (1972), 9-11, and also the works cited in note 19 below.

[16]See references from the entries on "tone" or "point-of-view" in the index of virtually any technical writing textbook.

[17]Gordon Mills and John Walter, Technical Writing, 4th ed. (New York, 1978), p. 29.

[18]Charles W. Strong and Donald Eidson, A Technical Writer's Handbook (New York, 1971), p. 24.

[19]W. Earl Britton, "Personality in Scientific Writing," Technical Communication, 20:3 (1973), 8-11; and Merrill D. Whitburn, "Personality in Scientific and Technical Writing," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 6 (1976) 229-306.

[20]"Credibility and Reasoning in Technical Writing--Some Notes for Writers, Editors, and Instructors," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 6 (1976), 35-51.

[21]Jesse G. Delia, "A Constructivist Analysis of the Concept of Credibility," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 361-75.

[22]I am referring specifically to the discussion of ethos in the work of S. Michael Halloran, "Eloquence in a Technological Society" and "Technical Writing and the Rhetoric of Science," and to that of Carolyn Miller, "Technology as a Form of Consciousness: A Study of Contemporary Ethos."

[23]For confusion between the first two, see Thomas E. Corts, "The Derivation of Ethos," Speech Monographs, 35 (1968), 201-202; for the confusion between ethics and ethos, see George E. Yoos, "A Revision of the Concept of Ethical Appeal," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 12 (1979), 41-58 and also the article by H. Lee Shimberg, "Ethics and Rhetoric in Technical Writing," Technical Communication 25:4 (1978), 16-18.

[24]See the report on various studies by Richard M. Davis, "Does Expression Make a Difference?" Technical Communication, 23:2 (1976), 6-9.

[25]See especially the articles by Robert L. Corey, "The Persuasive Technical Proposal" and "Rhetoric and Technical Writing: Black Magic or Science?" Technical Communication, 25:4 (1978), 2-6.

[26]See Corey, "The Persuasive Technical Proposal: for suggestions about the features which constitute a "confident" ethos or a "judicious" one. See also Art Young, "What's Really Basic About Usage in Technical Writing?" The Technical Writing Teacher, 4 (1977), 69-70, for some suggestions about voice in the formal report; and R. S. Blicq, Technically-Write! (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), pp. 239-40, for a suggestive treatment of voice in technical instructions.